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THE SURPLUS POPULATION

ECONOFICTION GLOBAL SOUTH, MARXISM, POOR, RIOT, SURPLUSPOPULATION,
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Abstract: The surplus population, especially in the global South, has long since become a structural category within the political economy. This vast population group suffers from long-term underemployment and is forced to earn a vital income in the informal economies of the megacity slums. Additionally, it is supplemented by internationally migrating refugees who are fleeing wars, oppression, and natural disasters, and consequently have to reside as migrant workers in the non-places of the world. However, the surplus population of the global South is primarily concentrated in the “planets of slums,” as documented by Mike Davis in his book of the same name. In these locations, hundreds of millions of people endure lives of total squalor.

Keywords: Surplus Population, Riot, Global South, Poverty, Marx.

While the accumulation of capital at the beginning of the 20th century brought about a shift of the working population from agriculture to industry, at the end of the 20th century, at least in the capitalist core countries, there was a transfer of capital from industrial production areas to the financial, service, and information sectors, thereby causing deindustrialization. At this point, one should remember Marx's law of capitalist accumulation, which states that with increasing capital accumulation, both an industrial reserve army, which is in relation to official wage labor, and a surplus population outside the official labor markets develop, with the first population group being subsidized by the state for a long time, while the surplus population tries to secure its reproduction with slave labor, part-time jobs, and activities in the informal sector. The important membrane here is between the industrial reserve army (as part of the official labor market) and the surplus population, which is located outside the official labor market and is pushed worldwide, but especially in the Global South, into informational, semi-legal, or illegal economies. Marx already introduces the terms of relative and absolute surplus population. On the one hand, he speaks of the industrial reserve army as a cyclical phenomenon, insofar as it flows into or falls out of production depending on the degree of capital accumulation (relative). Marx also believes in a long-term tendency that leads to a disproportionate growth of the industrial reserve army compared to the entire working population. If this reserve army grows strongly in the long term, part of it must eventually fall out of the wage labor relationship due to the technical development of production and disappear from the official labor market, so it can no longer be used as variable capital at all (absolute). This development should also be empirically investigated based on technological developments at the level of the world market. The global proletariat today, in addition to the wage-dependent, collectively secured working class with relatively high wages (core staff) in the Western countries, also includes the precariat and a surplus population of over a billion, who are denied any access to the official labor markets and must reproduce in informal and non-capitalist economies or vegetate in slums, that is, exist as accumulated corpse-like existence.¹³³ It is these totally dispossessed, the masses of unemployed, the day laborers, and the Asian and African migrant workers exploited under proto-industrial conditions, the post-colonial army of slaves, the old and sick, but also the superfluous young people, who are trained by an education system that focuses mainly on the daily evaluation of everyone by everyone, for jobs that will not exist in the future – all in all the global lumpenproletariat, which is outside the official work system. The surplus population today vegetates mainly in the Global South on the narrow ridge between survival and total liquidation. The Buddhist economist Karl Heinz Brodbeck writes about the Global South: "There is probably a teleological, but no factual difference between what is produced on the one hand at the global market barriers in terms of hunger, death, and misery and on the other hand in the camps of Hitler, Stalin, Mao, as well as the enclosures and camps of the US empire and its satellites. Certainly, in the camps there is naked and intended violence, guided by the intention to torture and kill specifically. The victims of the markets are probably not intended, but they are precisely and literally accepted. The madness of both actions, the production of victims or their acceptance, nevertheless has a common form: The enforcement of an abstraction without regard to the means, guided by the stupid pride of a ruling ignorance. It is therefore not a coincidence that an instrumental convergence between totalitarian violence

and the abstract rule of money is increasingly emerging, and the difference between the misery in the slums and the terror in the modern torture chambers is being leveled” (Brodbeck 2012: 1232-1233).

In his book *Cyber-Proletariat*, Nick Dyer-Witheford examines in detail the composition of the global proletariat (in its relationship to cybernetics), which he calls a “multifaceted multiverse” composed of those layers that can still sell or rent their labor power to capital to secure reproduction, an industrial reserve army without work supported by the welfare state, and a surplus population divided into those who work in the informal sectors of the subsistence economy and those who are denied any employment and have thus become completely useless not only for capital but increasingly for any kind of production. (Dyer-Witheford 2015: 126f.) The surplus population continues to grow today both in the informal sectors of the economy and in the minimal subsistence economy, while at the same time precarious wage labor is expanding in a diffuse service sector; we also see the mobilization of women for paid and unpaid work in the reproduction sector and the escalation of underemployment and unpaid or insecure work. In the peripheries of the Global South, in addition to the informal sectors that are still connected to the circuits of capital,¹³⁴ (home work and work without contract), there are also non-capitalist modes of production such as slavery or subsistence economy. There are productions in which labor power is integrated into the commodity-money-commodity cycle, where the first commodity is labor power itself, which is bought for money and integrated into a production process, the products of which, when realized on the market, bring in just enough money to purchase the goods necessary for the reproduction of labor power and a small surplus for the entrepreneur. (Sayal 2007: Kindle Edition 5014)

The collective *Théorie Communiste* speaks today of three zones on the capitalist world market: 1) The hyperzones of capital with high functional performances in the area of labor markets and production sites (finance, technology, and research). 2) Secondary zones with intermediate industries and technologies (logistics and communication). 3) Crisis zones of informational industries with low-paid jobs or zones where no work is done at all. (Dyer-Witheford 2015: 126f.) In the first zone, high-paid wage labor including private risk coverage meets such work in which certain aspects of Fordism remain, while other workers struggle with precarious conditions. In the second zone, precarious, low-paid work is the norm, mixed with islands of contractually paid work, with migration and the lack of social risk coverage. In the third zone, the survival of the proletariat depends on humanitarian aid, illegal trade and mafia structures, on agriculture, but also on small communities. This layering and stratification must be understood as a volatile and porous process, permeated by constant global migration movements of the proletariat and the restructurings by capital. What is modern on a global level is not universal progress towards prosperity and the rule of law, but an accelerated descent into informality, precariousness, and pure superfluity. Instead of upward mobility, there is only a staircase down to report for part of humanity, over which laid-off workers and dismissed public employees of the formal sector descend into the shadow economy, and this not only in the Global South. This development has also gained momentum in the imperialist countries and has since the 2008 financial crisis and the Corona pandemic have given a new massive boost.

The growth of the informal economy not only coincides with neoliberal globalization, but is

further driven by a rapid transition from state regulation to new laissez-faire regimes. As the ILO notes, it is now widely recognized that the stabilization and structural adjustment policies of the 1980s and 1990s, which led to increasing poverty, unemployment, and underemployment in many countries, contributed to the spread of the informal economy. (ILO 2018) The existence of informal work allows capitalists to cut costs and increase flexibility, among other things through forced overtime, layoffs, and the absence of regulations and legal protection, so that the risks and costs of adapting to demand are transferred to the workers. Part of the informal proletariat remains a labor pool for the formal economy and its networks, which reach deep into slums.

Thus, the official unemployment rates in the countries in the Global South are already very high, but they hide the true extent of the number of people living on the edge of or below the subsistence minimum, and that without any possibility of earning their livelihood. These dispossessed workers are on the one hand former farmers, who would flock back to the countryside in millions, especially in Asia, if there were farmland and cheap credits available for them, on the other hand unemployed people who vegetate in the slums or perform fragmented work. Generally, it is the case that workers are released by stronger technological development in one sector and can find employment in new sectors. However, the current development in China shows that even in these new sectors, the most advanced production methods are used, so they absorb less labor than with old production methods. Thus, today the rise of some emerging countries is not only based on cheap labor, as John Smith often assumes, but also on modern technology, so that the productive absorption of labor is less than the high growth rates in China, for example, suggest.

William I. Robinson identifies three forms of surplus proletariat: a floating, a latent, and a stagnant surplus proletariat. The first two forms are groups that can still enter and exit the wage-dependent production process according to the cycles of capital accumulation and are integrated by new forms of division of labor (industrial reserve army). The third group are those who are structurally outside the production process. (Robinson 2021) Marx tried to capture this group under the term of the lumpenproletariat, but he could not foresee the processes in and with which, for example, through the replacement of work by technologies, but also through other processes, the existence of the surplus population would become a structural problem for the world economy. Apart from Marx's largely negative qualification of the lumpenproletariat, this is now a structural moment that stands for the marginalization of the outcasts in the capitalist world system.

The surplus population, especially in the Global South, has long become a structural category of political economy; it is a huge population group that suffers from long-term underemployment, has to generate a vital income in the informal economy of the slums of megacities and is supplemented by internationally migrating refugees who flee wars, oppression, and natural disasters and have to live as labor migrants in the non-places of the world. The surplus population of the Global South has mainly concentrated in the "planet of slums", as Mike Davis has documented in his book of the same name, where hundreds of millions of people live in total misery. The spectacular growth of urban slums is also a result of the deep crisis in the countryside. As Mike Davis notes, urbanization in the Global South is rapidly advancing despite falling real wages, rising prices, and exploding unemployment.

(Davis 2007)

Gilles Deleuze, as early as the 1990s, presciently spoke of the universally indebted human being, but quickly added, against any ontologization of debt, that the powers of control always face the danger of uprisings – the indebted and the excluded are one and the same. They are the same global surplus, with the indebted as microcredit borrowers still having an economic function for financial capital, while larger parts of the surplus population vegetate as human waste in the slums of the southern metropolises, functionless for capital. Today, capital must constantly find new agents capable of incurring debt, students, homeowners, and part-time workers, without being able to reduce the surplus population on a global scale even remotely.

If today the uprising is not only a collective action but a form of class struggle, then the surplus population must also possess an explanatory power in this; it is to be understood as a constitutive part of the global proletariat, whose historical task lies in the negation of capital. The more the better-off and collectively secured parts of the working class in the western metropolises affirm capital in order to be able to reproduce themselves at a relatively comfortable economic and social level, the more massive the political significance of a globally expanding proletariat that largely no longer has access to traditional forms of reproduction. According to Joshua Clover, we are in the midst of a long-lasting exodus of the propertyless from all continents to the western world, driven by increasing geopolitical volatility, wars, and the inability of capital to adequately absorb the workforce in the countries of the Global South – a diaspora of an expanding suprafluidity and at the same time immobile and abandoned surplus population. (Clover 2021)

If the everyday life of a part of the world's population in the Global South increasingly takes place in informal economies, then this part itself becomes surplus and is confronted with the conditions of its reproduction beyond the wage labor relationship, and in this conflict-ridden situation, which then also shows up on the streets, any unauthorized gathering of a group at the corner, on a public square, or just in the streets can be understood as a potential riot. In contrast to the strike, it is difficult to find out when the riot starts or when it ends. On the one hand, it is a particular event, on the other hand, it is the holographic miniature of a complete situation, a world-picture.

The riot seems to maintain or affirm nothing, perhaps a shared antagonism, a shared misery, and a shared negation. Often it does not even possess the positive language of a program or a demand, but only the negative language of vandalism, destruction, and aimlessness. But still, it is not lacking in determination. Clover speaks of the overdetermination of the riot by historical transformations that make the antagonism, especially the struggles in circulation, necessary. The welfare state, which still accompanied the accumulation of capital in Fordism, has disappeared, and with it the possibilities of capital and the state to ensure social and economic improvements for wage earners. Capital and labor are increasingly moving into circulation, while the surplus population is in the informal economy. The new uprisings in circulation do not necessarily have to be carried by workers, because in principle anyone can liberate a marketplace, close a street, or occupy a port. The insurgents may be workers, but they do not function as workers in the riot, because the participants are unified here not by their jobs, but in their function as dispossessed.¹³⁵ While the early riot hardly confronted the

police and the armed state (it took place in the economic space), this has changed with the post-industrial riot. On the one hand, one directly sees the ensemble of goods in the local supermarkets, on the other hand, when it comes to the pricing of goods, one is confronted with capital economy as an invisible planetary logistics and a barely graspable financial industry. Only the police can be spotted at every corner. An important moment of the uprising is surprisingly made by Joshua Clover in the concept of surplus, whereas the uprising is usually understood in the context of deprivation, lack, and deficit, while for Clover it precisely indicates the lived experience of surplus, such as surplus danger, surplus instruments, and surplus affects. The most important surplus is the actively negating, resistant population in the breaking moments of mass mobilization, which condense into an event in which the uprising bursts the police management of a concrete situation and at the same time radically decouples from everyday life. However, this type of insurgent surplus production always remains confronted with the conditions of socio-economic processes and transformations that respond to crises or constitute them in the first place. All of this shows the uprising not only as a purely contingent, but also as a necessary form of political struggle. In view of the existence of a huge surplus population and the insurgent politics of surplus, Clover comes to an important conclusion: The uprising is the modality through which the surplus is lived. (Ibid.) Primary circulation is today primary uprising, which is the surplus life – however short-term – itself; The latter is the subject of politics and thus at the same time the object of state violence. The violence of the police now becomes part of the uprising itself, or, to put it another way, the flashing coalition of the insurgent surplus exists in an economy of state violence.

taken from the book “Capitalism in the Age of Catastrophe”. You can buy here: <https://forceincmilleplateaux.bandcamp.com/merch/capitalism-in-the-age-of-catastrophe>

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